



Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

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Who killed Leigh Leigh? A story of shame and mateship in an Australian town.

Random House, Sydney, New South Wales.

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<https://www.amazon.com/Who-Killed-Leigh-Kerry-Carrington/dp/0091837081>

Kerry Carrington, (1998) *Who Killed Leigh Leigh? A story of shame and mateship in an Australian Town*, Random House, Sydney.

A synopsis of Who Killed Leigh Leigh? – The book is out of print

The Crime, My Research & its Genealogy

On the night of the 3rd November 1989 14 year old Leigh Leigh was subjected to a series of degrading taunts, assaults and violent sexual assaults, before being strangled, bashed and bludgeoned to death with a large rock. She had been attending a beach party on the Stockton coast line about 200 kilometres from Sydney, Australia. Of a large number of boys involved in spitting upon, assaulting and otherwise degrading the victim shortly before her death, only one was charged with assault, and another with carnal knowledge (not rape), although she, and others present, had claimed he'd raped her. No-one has ever been prosecuted for Leigh Leigh's rape, despite serious genital injuries that one forensic scientist described as most likely to have been inflicted by an inflexible object like a broken bottle.

Immediately following the discovery of Leigh's naked mutilated body the crime was widely and unambiguously reported as a sex crime. Three months later, Matthew Webster an 18 year old working class boy from Stockton was charged with her murder after 'confessing' to it in a police interview using the tried old tactics of custodial interrogation. However, building up to and following Webster's conviction, the crime was predominantly reported as a murder only involving a callous and brutal bashing.

In much of the public and court-room discourse about this crime, the consumption of drugs and alcohol, sexual promiscuity and lack of parental supervision were represented as the reasons for it. Her killer's sexuality and the conduct of other boys at the party that night, attracted little public criticism or comment. The discourses of guilt were so thoroughly and mercilessly inverted that Matthew Webster, her self-confessed killer, was represented as a 'gentle giant', an unfortunate victim of 'uncharacteristic and impulsive ferocity whilst disinhibited by alcohol and drugs'. A quite remarkable silencing occurred. Understandings of the crime as a heinous act of sexual violence were almost completely expunged from public discourse.

My research began as an interrogation of that silencing; and along with it, the symbolic reversal of the victim and offender. At the same time, I was teaching a subject called Youth Culture and Delinquency, at the University of Newcastle with Andrew Johnson. It was sheer coincidence that some of Leigh Leigh's older school peers and acquaintances were enrolled in the subject. I became interested in how this crime was connected to a local Novocastrian culture which seemed to exhibit a high level of tolerance for sexual violence among its adolescent population. I was interested in how this culture overlapped with the local surfing culture, the occupational culture of the BHP steel-works, and the notorious hard-edged working class culture of the city. I applied for a small university grant to conduct a study of sexuality, adolescence and popular culture in Newcastle. Andrew Johnson worked as the research assistant on the project. We began by retrieving the media clippings relating to the Leigh Leigh case, both locally and nationally, and interviewing those who had known her. This led to the 'discovery' that the discourses of sexual violence which had initially

shaped how this crime occurred, were curiously silenced upon Matthew Webster's admission to the murder some three months later.

I gave my first academic conference paper about the case in December 1993 at a Law and Society Conference convened by the Macquarie University Law School. A small article by Greg Bearup then a Newcastle Herald journalist, described the research I was doing (Newcastle Herald, 3 January 1994). This prompted Leigh Leigh's relatives to contact me. The first to make contact was Robyn Leigh her mother, who wrote:

I am the mother of Leigh Leigh... For the last four and half years I have been fighting for the truth of what really happened that night to be told. ... The way the police handled the whole case sickens me... I have written to anyone I could think who could help me. But all the politicians, police, Ombudsman, Commissioner for Human Rights all ignored my pleas for help.... I appreciate you writing to [the] paper and standing up for Leigh. People forget Leigh was the victim not the boys, Stockton or the kids at the party but Leigh... I have a court case coming up soon and am praying to anyone who will listen to the truth on what really happened that night.... I thank you from my heart for speaking out on Leigh's behalf. Yours sincerely R. Leigh.'

Later I was contacted by Toni Maunsell, Leigh's aunt, and over the next few years I had met nearly every one in Leigh's extended maternal family, from great grandmother, grandmother, two aunts, and several cousins. Toni and I maintained a close relationship until her tragic premature death, and somewhat ironically she later became one of my strongest supports throughout my ordeal with the PIC. But at the time it was Robyn Leigh's personal plea that spurred my deeper involvement and continuing research into the case after the initial conference paper. With her support, as a public intellectual, with a privileged access to the institutions that produce regimes of truth, I somewhat naively set about challenging the production of a number of legal fictions associated with the case. I arranged for Academics for Justice, a loose knit group of academics that challenged specific instances of injustices, to fund Mrs Leigh's appeal against her victim's compensation case. I introduced her to a new lawyer from the Newcastle Legal Centre, attached to the university, to act for her in the matter. I arranged for a number of fresh forensic opinions to be sort on the autopsy report and other materials. In August 1994, on behalf of Mrs Leigh I prepared a submission to the NSW Royal Commission into Police Corruption, headed by Justice Wood, the same judge who sentenced Matthew Webster, referring to him as a 'gentle giant'. It all came to naught basically (for a detailed account see Carrington, 1998).

I then wrote a book about the crime, the failures of the police investigation, the legal fictions produced by the various proceedings, the complaints into these failures, the scapegoating of the victim and the martyrdom of the murderer, and worrying aspects of rituals of sexual violence to which some young men are drawn. The following year in January 1999 I was summoned to appear before the Police Integrity Commission (PIC) with a week's notice and no choice about not to appear. A long-time critic of the legal system's handling of the case, I had published an academic article about the case one in 1994, and in 1998 a book tendered into evidence as Exhibit 72. Under summons I was cross-examined for three days by eight different legal counsel, longer than any other witness, and much longer than most of the police called to account for alleged misconduct before these hearings. The PIC is an enormously powerful public agency. At the same time it is exempt from

many of the measures of accountability that generally apply to the public sector, including Freedom of Information and Privacy legislation. The sole mechanism of accountability appears to be the PIC Inspectorate. Yet the oversight functions of the PIC Inspectorate are vastly inadequate.

Carrington, K. Johnson, A. (1994) 'Representations of Guilt, Crime & Sexuality in the Leigh Leigh Rape/Murder Case', *Australian Feminist Law Journal*, Vol. 4. pp. 3-29.

47. Carrington, K. (2003) 'Feminist research in crimino-legal studies: Reflections on "absolute rubbish"', *Law, Text and Culture*, Vol. 6, pp. 1-30